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ABSTRACT

The problems encountered by English as second language (ESL) students in selecting verb tenses for their written discourse were investigated. Tape recorded interviews with four freshman composition students who had been referred for intensive work on verb errors were analyzed for students' explanations of their errors and the contexts in which they appeared. The data revealed that ESL students had difficulty understanding how tense use was influenced by context and rhetorical or temporal stance. Second, the comprehensibility of tense choice was examined in the writing of native English speaking graduate students. Sixty native English speakers rated the texts in terms of clarity. Results showed a correlation between readers' judgments of clarity and writers' adherence to discourse level tense constraints described by Chafe (1972). These studies demonstrate that teachers should avoid contextless explanations or exercises on verb tense, and that the students' own writing provides the best basis for working on verb tense problems. Students should be taught how to manage the composing process and how good writers work. Guidelines for materials development are offered, and samples of the texts used in the second study and eight references are appended. (RW)

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Verb Tense and ESL Composition: A Discourse Level Approach*

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Abstract

ESL students' tense choices often distract from the overall comprehensibility of their writing. Some students seem to choose tenses arbitrarily; others switch tenses apparently at random. Individual sentences, removed from the text, might be grammatically correct, but at the discourse level the use of tense does not work.

This paper reports on research undertaken to investigate these problems. First, students were taped talking about verb errors in their writing. Data from these conferences reveal that students have difficulty understanding how context and rhetorical or temporal stance influence tense use. Second, comprehensibility of tense choices was examined in the writing of native-speaking graduate students. This study shows a correlation between readers' judgments of clarity and writers' adherence to discourse level tense constraints described by Chafe (1972).

The second part of the paper discusses the pedagogical implications of these studies and offers guidelines for materials development. The research clearly indicates that teachers should avoid contextless explanations for and exercises on verb tense, and that students' own writing provides the best basis for working on verb tense problems. Students need to be taught to manage the composing process. They need to know not only how English works, but also how good writers work.

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*Presentation at TESOL 1982, Honolulu, Hawaii.

Verb Tense and ESL Composition: A Discourse Level Approach*

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Teaching verb forms and tense use is a major issue in TESL. Verbs are often a principal factor in syllabus organization, the main focus in drills and exercises, and a primary target of teachers' corrections of written work. Unfortunately, the frequent emphasis on correctness of verb usage distracts non-native speakers from the meaning of verb tenses. This problem is reflected in writing in which some students seem to choose tenses arbitrarily and others switch tenses apparently at random. Although individual sentences may be grammatically correct, the verb tenses do not work at the discourse level because they break the continuity established by earlier adverbials and tenses and thus distract from the meaning and rhetorical functions of a piece of writing.

Looking at students' verb problems from the discourse level reveals the inadequacy of pedagogical approaches that consider only the content of single sentences as the basis for tense choice. What a teacher may categorize as an error in form or in what is frequently referred to as tense consistency may result from a student's misunderstanding of how English tenses function in discourse. Because tense conveys the connections between an action and a writer's stance, errors in tense use may stem from lack of experience in creating a context or time frame for a piece of discourse so that it communicates sequence and temporal context to a reader.

The first part of this paper reports on two studies of verb tense use in discourse from different perspectives. The first is an analysis of ESL writers' explanations of verb tense errors in their writing, and the second, an investigation of readers' perceptions of tense choice in term papers of native-speaking graduate students. The second part of the paper discusses

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pedagogical implications of the studies and provides guidelines for materials development.

Students' explanations of their errors

The error analysis project involved audio-taped conferences with four ESL freshman composition students who had been referred to a writing lab at the University of Washington for intensive work on error. The tapes were analyzed for information about the students' explanations of their errors and the discourse contexts in which errors appeared. To get direct evidence about the interlanguage systems (Selinker 1972) the students were aware of using, they were asked to try to explain why they chose specific erroneous forms. About one third of the verb errors discussed on the tapes can be classified as performance-based in that students knew the relevant rule and could correct the error readily. The explanations here were variations of, "I forgot." A somewhat larger group of errors, 40 per cent of the corpus, represented problems with form. The students knew what tense to use, but were forming it incorrectly. Difficulties here ranged from thinking spent was a present tense form to problems with modals and passives.

The third category of errors, problems with tense choice itself, accounted for a quarter of the errors on the tapes and became the focus of the second area of inquiry, the discourse context of verb errors. The basic research question was whether verb errors appeared more often in some verb tense, syntactic, or rhetorical environments than in others. It was hypothesized that there would be more errors in contexts that required shifts in verb tense, and this hypothesis was confirmed. Examples of con-

texts calling for shifts in verb tense include discourse that requires perfects or modals, texts that illustrate present tense exposition with past tense narrative, and past tense passages that use generic present tense to provide background information.

Analysis of the errors occurring in multi-tense discourse and of errors resulting from unnecessary tense shifts suggests that rhetorical context has more bearing on verb tense and form than is generally recognized. Looking at verb forms from the broadened perspective of rhetorical context is particularly intriguing because it suggests that some of the problems teachers label as verb errors, solvable by more faithful adherence to rules, in fact reflect more subtle rhetorical issues.

For example, in the following passage the error occurs exactly at the point of a rhetorical shift from description to narration, a shift that the student misunderstood as requiring a tense shift as well.

> (1) It is a clear sunny afternoon. As I view the scene from my bedroom window. I feel ecstasy as I gaze over the crystal clear Portage Bay and I can see the small colorful sailing boats. The sun rays are strong and the heat penetrates the window. As I opened the window, a cool breeze flashes on my face, it ~~was~~ is (revised during oral reading) refreshing.

The student explained that she used opened in sentence #5 because the as confused her and she thought it mandated a tense change. Yet she used present tense for flashes and emphatically changed was to is as she read aloud.

Textual analysis of the passage shows that as introduces an action that

is prior to the moment of writing; logically, one cannot open a window as one writes. Unlike the other two verbs used with as in the paragraph, view and gaze, the verb opened depicts an action that is prior to and causative of the action in the main clause, flashes. It would appear that some combination of these factors made the shift to narrative action signaled by as take precedence over the present tense constraint previously established, perhaps because the constraint was established not with adverbials but with tense usage itself. The result was the anomalous opened.

Booth's (1963) notion of rhetorical stance helps clarify the issues involved with tense choice in contexts like this. He defines rhetorical stance as the maintenance of a balance among three elements: subject matter, audience, and authorial voice. If tense choices are understood to be determined by a time frame that involves the relationship between a writer at the moment of writing and the events or ideas to be written about, part of rhetorical stance involves what might be called temporal stance. Temporal stance is a balance between the writer, who remains at a fixed position, and the shifting time frames of the actions or states under discussion, a balance that determines tense choice.

The excerpt below from another student's journal illustrates tense use that appears to be more a matter of temporal, or rhetorical, stance than of rule application or misapplication.

> (2) I have to study physic tonight and math too. It will wear me out if I don't eat and have to study, especially study physic. This class took me a lot of time and energy. Sometime it took me 3 hours to read it and then come up with nothing. I know I am not good at physic but I like to study it.

The student explained that she used took because the studying was in the past. Her logic cannot be denied. Strictly speaking, the action conveyed by took is prior to that of the other verbs in the passage, all of which refer to states that are true at the moment of writing. Yet past tense does not work because the student means to generalize, to indicate usual occurences that have direct relevance to her thoughts as she writes. The notion of temporal stance is applicable here because her choice of verb form should depend not on the time of the actions, but on her relationship to them now, as she writes. She needs a tense that will enable her to indicate the continuing importance of the events. After discussion with the instructor she decided to use takes in the third sentence and has taken in the fourth.

The journal entry at (3) from the same student provides further illustration of the connection between a writer's stance and tense choice. During the conference, which was focused on issues of tense and form, when the teacher suggested that the passage had verb problems, the student read through it and changed all but the last present tense forms to past tense without explanation. But the difference in subject matter between the sentences where she uses past tense, sentence #1 and the last two sentences, and the others, in which she consistently uses present or future tense, provides a basis for speculation about her shifting temporal stance.

> (3) I woke up very late this morning. Almost to 7:30. I have a test today at 8:30 but I have to leave at 8 o'clock in order to get there on time for my test. I only have 30 minutes to wash my face, get dress, curl my hair and including make up.

> I know I will be late but I can't do anything else. I will run though. Last night I stayed up so late until 2 o'clock. I went to bed only for 5 and 1/2 hours which is 3 hours shorter than what I usually sleep during a high school day.

The student begins with past tense--waking up must be a completed event--and uses it again later for prior events that explain why she woke up late. But the purpose of the present tense sentences in between is less reporting than anticipating, which she does as if it were current at the moment of writing. The shift is marked by the verbless sentence fragment, Almost to 7:30. From then on the reader is back with her, worrying about getting to class on time. One way of describing these problems is as an inappropriate shift in stance between sentence #1, which looks backward to report what has already happened, and sentences #3-6, where the writer takes up a position within the events being discussed and anticipates what has to be done before the 8:30 exam.

In the closing sentence, which she did not correct, the student makes a similar backward shift in stance by using present tense for a completed situation, but this time she had an explicit rule to cite as justification. She considered sleep to be correct because it referred to a habit. That is, a present tense constraint associated with usually, which precedes the verb, took precedence over the more relevant, during a high school day, which comes after it.

The passage illustrates two different sources of verb tense errors. In the first set of problems, sentences #3-6, the lexical content of the verbs seems to take precedence over contextual meaning, and the verbs that

convey the urgency of the situation after she overslept are in present and future tense. The result is an an inappropriate shift in temporal stance to the action itself, away from the constraints or continuity of the written text. A similar shift was apparent in the use of took in example (2). But in the last sentence, a rule takes precedence over contextual meaning. Like the student who wrote passage (1), this writer chose tense on a sentence-by-sentence, or clause-by-clause, basis without regard to consistency of temporal stance. In all these instances the problem is that either the event or the rule, but not the writer, is in control.

In both types of error, the correct form, the tense that would convey meaning clearly to an audience, requires a balancing of lexical content (subject matter) with verb tense (the temporal relationship of the speaker to the subject matter). In other words, the correct tense choice depends upon the writer's temporal stance in relationship to the actions discussed.

The primary implication of these apparent connections between rhetorical context and tense use is that as diagnosticians analyzing student errors and as teachers preparing lessons, we need to look at how verb forms and tenses, correct and incorrect, function rhetorically. This perspective can enhance teachers' understanding of students' errors, and can help students understand why their use of rules sometimes leads to errors.

Readers' perceptions of tense choice

In addition to verb errors, ESL students' writing is frequently marked by tense use that although not incorrect, is difficult for readers to comprehend. Consider this example of student writing:

(4) The most complicated problem that people face is poverty. Economists from all over the world had spent a lot of their time to find its causes. Using all that advanced technology has given they could give only the percentage of increase or decrease of poverty in the world.

Tense is formed correctly in individual sentences, but the reader is left with unanswered questions. For example, in the first sentence, does the writer mean always, general truth? What is indicated by the verb had spent? Before what? In other words, the use of tense creates ambiguity.

To account for well-formedness of tense in discourse, Chafe (1972:50) posits a rule that states that a temporal adverbial, present at the beginning of discourse, causes the verbs that follow to acquire a particular tense, up to the point where another time adverbial introduces a different tense. Generic verbs, which introduce general, timeless statements, are immune to the constraint initiated by the adverbial.

Example (5) illustrates this concept. In the first sentence the adverbial last year initiates the constraint labeled past. Other than the generic verb, like, in sentence #1, this constraint is maintained until the adverbial next year initiates the future.

(5) I had a good time camping last year because I like outdoor activities. I went to the mountains and stayed there for three days. I walked and rested and didn't talk to anyone. I will go again next year.

Godfrey (1980:94) modifies Chafe's rule in order to "more precisely

characterize the initiation of the constraint." He contends that the first use of a tense, not a temporal adverbial, initiates a tense constraint. A new topic causes the temporary constraint to disappear and initiates a new one, a new tense. He further argues that "the occurence of a time adverbial is no more than a signal that heightens the salience of the temporal reference initiated in a constraint" (1980:95), implying that example (6) is also well formed with respect to tense.

> (6) I had a good time camping because I like outdoor activities. I went to the mountains and stayed there for three days. I walked and rested and didn't talk to anyone. I will go again.

However, one could question whether this example conforms to the conventions of formal writing. That is, does the text stand on its own? The reader has to rely on extra-linguistic information to interpret tense. The absence of an adverbial in the first and last sentences, along with the tense switch at the end, produces ambiguity. Thus, it seems that Godfrey represents tense use in conversation or informal writing but not in formal writing.

For analysis of ESL writers' tense problems, both Godfrey's and Chafe's representations of tense use are problematic because neither distinguishes between spoken and written discourse. Therefore, in the context of formal writing, the following questions remain. What do readers need in order to interpret tense? What accounts for well-formedness of tense?

Design of study. The use of adverbials and tense was examined in introductory paragraphs of research papers written by native speaking graduate

students in fields of history, political science, medicine, and agriculture. Three samples that did not conform to Chafe's description of tense use in discourse where selected for the study. Each of the three samples was revised in two ways. In one revision, a tense constraint was initiated by a temporal adverbial in the first sentence; this constraint was maintained throughout the text. In other words, the text was written in one tense, except for generic verbs that introduced timeless statements. The other revision conformed to Chafe's description. (Sample original and revisions are included as an appendix.)

Native speakers were asked to read three versions of one text (the original and two revisions) and rank them with respect to clarity, which was not defined but was assumed to elicit judgments of comprehensibility. Furthermore, it was assumed that the term would elicit judgments about semantic not grammatical relations. The readers were also asked to comment, if possible, on why they had ranked the texts as they had.

There were 20 readers per text, 60 total. For each text, the readers were approximately 25 per cent ESL instructors, 25 per cent English (non-ESL) instructors, 25 per cent instructors of subjects other than English, and 25 per cent noninstructors with education above the bachelor's degree level. The greater proportion of instructors to noninstructors was intentional because readers' needs and expectations for academic written discourse were being investigated.

The hypothesis was that native speakers would find the Chafe version to be the clearest, the most comprehensible, due to the explicit semantic references for the tense forms, and that tense-adverbial relations would have very low saliency.

The readers' rankings are summarized in Table 1. Most readers did, in fact, rank the Chafe version as being the clearest. Only three chose the original and two of them had read it last. Only English teachers chose the version written in one tense. Their comments reflect their preference for a single tense per paragraph. Several remarked that tense use in the other two versions violates "the rule that one paragraph should have one tense."

The comments about the reasons for ranking are varied but can be classified into three groups: comments that paraphrase and elaborate clarity, comments on form other than tense, and finally comments on tense, adverbials, and time relations. Representative examples from each category are found in Table 2. Although the readers commented on a number of features, it should be kept in mind that only changes in tense and adverbials were made to the original. In accordance with the hypothesis, only 20 per cent, all of them English teachers, commented on the presence or absence of adverbials. One remarked, "Since then makes it clear what the writer means by has had."

Conclusions. When reading samples of academic writing, these readers needed adverbial specification to interpret tense forms. Without specification, they found tense to be confusing, ambiguous, and disturbing. When the pattern of adverbials and tense conformed to Chafe's framework, they found the text to be cohesive and comprehensible.

ESL writers' problems

This research helps clarify what can go wrong with verb tense in ESL students' writing. For example, when ESL writers seem to shift tense at random, it may be only the absence of temporal adverbials that makes their tense choices seem arbitrary. In other words, it is not the tense shifts

Table 1

Texts Ranked Highest for Clarity

	Text A N=20	Text B N=20	Text C N=20
Version 1 (original)	0%	5%	10%
Version 2 (one tense)	10%	5%	5%
Version 3 (Chafe)	90%	90%	85%

Table 2

Representative Comments from Readers

I.	Comments on clarity--paraphrase and elaboration: 80 per cent (N=60) "The text is more lucid." "More logical." "Conclusion seems more accurate in relation to content." Twenty-five per cent of these readers use the word cohesive in their remarks. One reader (non-English instructor) even comments that the original is "full of incipient jargon," whereas the Chafe version is "cohesive, logical, no jargon."
II.	Comments on form: 15 per cent (N=60) These range from "shorter more concise sentences helped me get through the topic" to "punctuation is more accurate" (in the Chafe version). Only one of these readers is an English teacher.
III.	Comments on tense, adverbials, time: 80 per cent (N=60) "The time relationships are clearer--somehow." "The wanton mingling of past, present perfect, present was disorienting." "The use of tense is confusing, when? since when? or is the writer trying to generalize?" "The second version jumps around." "The time reference is confusing."

that produce ambiguity but the lack of temporal adverbials. Furthermore, even when a tense is correct, the absence of time adverbials may result in a texts' being incohesive overall.

We can help ESL students with verb tense in their writing by making them aware of the relationships between and constraints on adverbials and tense in written discourse. However, it would be misguided merely to teach them Chafe's or Godfrey's rule. We cannot assume that what they lack is a rule or what they need are structures, semantic or grammatical. In fact, in order to decide how to help students with tense problems, we first have to examine what they do when they write.

Flower and Hayes (1980:31) have pointed out that all writers develop strategies to deal with the composing process, which they describe as "the act of juggling a number of simultaneous constraints." ESL writers often adopt self-defeating strategies to manage composing in a foreign language, and these ineffective strategies are frequently the source of their tense problems.

One such strategy is to write for themselves instead of for a reader. For instance, the student writer of example (4) explained in conference that he meant poverty is the most complicated problem "nowadays." In other words, at some level he was aware of the constraints on and the relationship between the adverbial and tense, but while he was composing he either consciously or unconsciously assumed that the reader would know what he meant. As ESL teachers we can help students by asking them to write their papers in drafts. We can recognize that students will often write a first draft with the purpose of finding out what they want to do and say in the paper. In a revision stage we can ask them to transform this "writer-based prose" to "reader-based prose" (Flower 1979). Before asking them to revise their own

tense use, we can ask them to read and react to passages with adverbials removed. We can ask them to respond to each other's writing with respect to tense and clarity. Finally, we can ask them to become readers of their own writing and revise it with readers' needs in mind.

Another strategy that ESL students use is to set high priorities on low-order correctness. For example, from the time they set pen to paper they worry inordinately about spelling or verb form. As teachers, we need to help them see that if they pour so much energy into the form of the past tense or the spelling of each word, they may produce correct sentences that do not cohere, correct verb forms that do not accurately reflect what they want to do or say in their writing. We need to teach them to save these concerns for their final draft. We need to teach them to edit, to pick out the verbs in their sentences and check them for form, but only after they have something to edit.

A third strategy that ESL writers use is to search for contextless rules and formulas that will produce a correct answer. They try to find or discover the one rule for past tense, a rule that does not depend on meaning, purpose, audience, or the growing text itself for its implementation. We can help students by not providing them with contextless explanations for tense meaning, explanations that ignore considerations of audience, purpose, and the text itself. Furthermore, as they revise writer-based drafts, we can help them decide whether specific rules or formulas can be used as tools to transform their writing to meet readers' needs.

When we worry about ESL students' tense in writing, we should remember that students' tense problems do not always emerge because they do not know

enough English or they do not know English well enough. They emerge because the student who is overwhelmed by the task of writing in a foreign language will concentrate on the wrong things at the wrong times. We need to teach these students to manage the composing process; we need to teach them not only how English works, but also how good writers work.

Materials development

The connections drawn here between verb tense use and discourse constraints lead inevitably to the recommendation that the best materials for teaching verb tense are drafts of the students' own writing. Nevertheless, teacher or textbook developed exercises can be useful for providing examples of native-speaker tense use and opportunities for practice in form. It is important, however, to recognize that these kinds of exercises are mainly providing practice in form, not practice in tense use, and it is advisable to use them always within an on-going discussion of what verb tenses convey to readers. In the light of these qualifications, the following guidelines for exercises are offered.

1. Avoid single sentence exercises. These not only fail to provide practice with verbs in a discourse context, but also lead students to think that tense choices can be made on a sentence-by-sentence or even clause-by-clause basis.

2. Use paragraph-length excerpts from authentic discourse. Students can discuss tense use and tense shifts in given paragraphs and can analyze differences in meaning between two versions of a passage with different tenses or adverbials. Such contrasts are particularly useful for illustrating the use of the present perfect within a present tense context (Moy 1977) and the

use of the past perfect to clarify sequence of events. Abraham (1981) provides numerous other suggestions for collecting and using material in the classroom.

3. Provide a meaningful context for tense transformation exercises. These exercises can provide valuable practice in using correct forms and spotting finite verbs in discourse, a useful editing skill. However, since performing these transformations has little connection with authentic writing tasks, it is important to discuss how temporal stance changes when the verb tense changes and how adverbials could be used to clarify this stance for a reader.

4. Be wary of prescriptions of one tense per paragraph. Some textbooks are suggesting that using only one tense per paragraph keeps point of view consistent. Such discourse is often artificial and certainly misleading about how tense is actually used in expository writing. Students infer that changing tenses is "against the rules."

5. Use modified cloze exercises (with verbs deleted) only tentatively. These exercises are the most useful when students work in collaborative groups so that they can explore their answers' effects on meaning and cohesion rather than work to find a single correct answer. When more than one tense is correct or grammatical in a given slot, students can explore the effect of adverbs on clarity.

Ultimately, the crucial pedagogical issue is not the use of one type of exercise over another, but the way in which the meaning of tenses is explained so that students can use them effectively, not to fill in a blank in someone else's thoughts but to express their own thoughts clearly to someone else.

Appendix

Sample Text - Research on Readers' Judgments of Clarity

Version 1 - original, as written by native-speaking graduate student

Despite the volatile nature of Chinese internal politics, Africa has long been an important facet in Peking's world strategy for several reasons. As a center of colonial imperialism and of liberation struggle, Africa prsented an ideal outlet for Maoist revolutionary ideology. The superficial similarities between the Chinese revolutionary experience and conditions in Africa have inspired early attempts to set the PRC up as a development model for African nations. The continent's strategically important location prompted Chinese leaders to seek influence there, not only for geo-political purposes but also because of the opportunities for non-official contact with the capitalist countries. For various reasons--the Vietnam War in particular--the attention of the super-powers was diverted from Africa and the Chinese have attempted to exploit this opportunity for political influence. Finally, Africa has represented an important source of raw materials, such as copper, which would be useful in China's own development effort. While Peking's motives toward the region as a whole underwent a variety of shifts, the Chinese focus on Africa can be traced to varying combinations of the factors cited above.

Version 2 - one tense

Despite the volatile nature of Chinese internal politics, Africa has long been an important facet of Peking's world strategy for several

reasons. As a center of colonial imperialism and of liberation struggle, Africa has presented an ideal outlet for Maoist revolutionary ideology. The superficial similarities between the Chinese revolutionary experience and conditions in Africa have inspired early attempts to set the PRC up as a development model for African nations. The continent's strategically important location has prompted Chinese leaders to seek influence there not only for geo-political purposes but also because of the opportunities for non-official contact with the capitalist countries. For various reasons--the Vietnam War in particular--the attention of the super-powers has been diverted from Africa and the Chinese have attempted to exploit this opportunity for political influence. Finally, Africa has represented an important source of raw materials, such as copper, which would be useful in China's own development effort. While Peking's motives toward the region as a whole have undergone a variety of shifts, the Chinese focus on Africa since 1949 can be traced to varying combinations of the factors cited above.

Version 3 - conforming to Chafe's (1972) description

Despite the volatile nature of Chinese internal politics, Aftrica has long been an important facet in Peking's world strategy for several reasons. As a center, first of colonial imperialism and later of liberation struggle, Africa presented an ideal outlet for Maoist revolutionary ideology. The superficial similarities between the Chinese revolutionary experience and conditions in Africa inspired early attempts to set the PRC up as a development model for African nations. The continent's strategically important location prompted Chinese leaders to seek influence there, not only for

geo-political purposes but also because of the opportunities for non-official contact with the capitalist countries. For various reasons--the Vietnam War in particular--the attention of the super-powers was diverted from Africa and the Chinese attempted to exploit this opportunity for political influence. Finally, Africa represented an important source of raw materials, such as copper, which would be useful in China's own development effort. While Peking's motives toward the region as a whole have undergone a variety of shifts since 1949, the Chinese focus on Africa can be traced to varying combinations of the factors cited above.

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